

TESTIMONY
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, PUBLIC
BUILDINGS AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT
OF THE
COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE
U. S HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
ON THE
OVERSITE HEARING “RECOVERING AFTER KATRINA: ENSURING
THAT FEMA IS UP TO THE TASK.”
KENT W. BUCKLEY, MCEM
DIRECTOR
BOLIVAR COUNTY EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY
CLEVELAND, MS
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Chairman Shuster, Ranking Member Norton, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, I thank you for inviting me here to provide testimony on our nation’s worst disaster and the recovery operations that will continue to be part of our lives in Mississippi for many months to come.

I am Kent Buckley, Director of the Bolivar County Emergency Management Agency, Cleveland, MS, an office established in 1960. I have held this position since June 1989. Emergency Managers have the role of coordinating all local emergency plans, preparedness, response, disaster drills, recovery, and mitigation with all emergency and non emergency disciplines. We bring everyone to the table from fire, law, medical, volunteers and the private sector. Much of what we can accomplish depends on staffing level and funding. A key source of funds for building capacity at the state and local level is the Emergency Management Performance Grant (EMPG), a program which was in FEMA but is now in the Office of

Domestic Preparedness. EMPG is a matching grant program and is the only source of our funding which can be used for personnel and is for all hazards. As Director I supervise our Emergency Management Program and coordinate with our volunteer non profit Emergency Operations Response Team of about 40 members. This team serves as a land and water search and rescue team and conducts vital storm tracking through the delta area. I coordinate with our non profit Delta K-9 Search and Rescue Unit that responds nearly state wide and has about 16 members. In addition, I have served as our county fire chief since 1988. I have also served as the Homeland Security Coordinator for Bolivar County since 2001.

I am a member of the International Association of Emergency Managers, which has over 2800 members including emergency management professionals at the state and local government levels, the military, private business and the nonprofit sector in the United States and other countries. I am serving an unprecedented third term as President of the Mississippi Civil Defense/Emergency Management Association (MCDEMA) and have served on the Board of Directors of the association for over ten years. I am a Mississippi Certified Emergency Manager. The Mississippi Civil Defense/Emergency Management Association is made up of mostly local Emergency Management/Civil Defense directors and staff along with some members from the Mississippi Emergency Management Agency (MEMA). MCDEMA was incorporated as a non profit in 1962 and promotes training and professionalism in our field. We conduct two conferences per year and have had attendance from other neighboring states and FEMA. We coordinate training, response and other matters with MEMA.

We have just experienced a new “Disaster Standard” in Mississippi. The old standard was Hurricane Camille that landed with 220 plus mile per hour winds and a storm surge of around 12 feet. Katrina was about three times larger and took up most of the Gulf while packing winds of around 145 miles per hour. To make matters worse she carried a storm surge of 28 to 30 feet. In Hancock County, “ground zero” for Mississippi, we found 28 foot water marks six miles inland at the I-10 and highway 603 bridge and 31 foot marks on the Jordan River bridge on I-10.

There are huge problems with trying to rebuild infrastructure. Hancock County where I responded was thrown into third world conditions. No infrastructure was there to build on or repair quickly. There was no power,

no water, no sewer, no phones, or emergency radio communications. No police cars in the city of Waveland where the storm surge came in and the policemen and women had to swim for their lives. The entire Gulf Coast was devastated with homes and businesses gone. There is no where for thousands to live and no tax base or income to the local citizens or governments. The big tax base in Biloxi and Gulfport was gone along with the beach and the area south of the railroad. In Gulfport homes and businesses were completely gone for about 2 blocks inland. In Waveland the difference was everything was gone for a mile inland. It looked like a windswept landfill. At the Hancock Emergency Operations Center the staff would not abandon their posts. The water rose 1 to 2 feet inside the building as they fought to keep it out. At one point they passed out life jackets and wrote numbers on their arms with permanent markers. They placed corresponding vital information and identification high in the ceiling just in case they did not survive. Soon after that the water stopped rising and they had a sigh of relief while they shared a few hugs and shared some tears. Many of them lost their homes and cars. And they lost some friends that would not evacuate.

I could go on about the response and there would be many interesting stories, but we are here today to talk beyond response into recovery. I felt you needed a picture of the event to be able to comprehend the massive amounts of debris and the total destruction of our infrastructure and tax base. The pictures on T.V. and the pictures I took do not do justice to the destruction. You will find your mouth open if you fly across the area as I did. Only then will you really understand just how massive it is.

One of the County supervisor districts in Hancock County comprises the Coastal area from Pearlington near Louisiana East to Waveland. He has virtually no structures left in his district.

The size and scope of Katrina warranted the decision to include debris removal from private property and commercial property. In most areas you can't tell which is which anyway. And the debris removal fees will fluctuate because of hazardous materials mixed in with much of the debris.

It's a shame that the brick and mortar debris may not be used to build breaks or to shore up the levee system in New Orleans.

With tax base and infrastructure gone it will be a terrible burden, especially on smaller towns and less populated counties to try to meet payroll much less bear up front costs for contracts and purchases. Advance payments to local governments will be vital to recovery. Many of these counties and municipalities are rebuilding infrastructure better than it was before to be able to facilitate the long term recovery process and make a smooth transition, eventually, from recovery to more normal operations. It would be ridiculous to build infrastructure back the way it was if it was inadequate before the storm.

FEMA assists with housing and this will be one of the biggest logistics problems that FEMA or anyone has ever dealt with. There are not enough trailers existing right now that meet the needs and the requirements. One coastal county has received about 850 trailers and the county has a need for about 10,000.

We still have many people in Hancock County living in their yards because they don't want to leave what little they have left. Donations have been pouring in from all over the U.S. and the many parts of the world. Some tents were sent from England and were distributed to those living in their yards so they could have some cover until something better could be arranged. The trailers are coming in and will be for some time. It will be a massive effort to get them delivered and set up. And later it will be a massive effort to move them out.

The FEMA organization overall has done many things well in Mississippi. We all have room for improvement. Getting Disaster Assistance Centers opened earlier would be a great improvement. Since there were virtually no buildings in Hancock County South of I-10, trailers or tents should have been brought in within the first five days after the storm. When you have no phone lines, no power, no computer, to internet, no cell phone, you have no means of registering with FEMA or Red Cross. Third world conditions warrant a non technical response for registration. A satellite phone bank might have helped. Even if you got a call out of your area you were faced with constant busy signals.

Logistics and tracking with FEMA have been mentioned in Mississippi. We need to find better ways of tracking our resources from orders to delivery. We need to work on that same thing with our state and locals, too.

I contacted a number of officials along the coast and some inland and we all agree that you can't run a Cadillac agency on a Volkswagen chassis and get a satisfactory response to one of the worst disasters in our history. In short, FEMA needs to be an independent agency out from under the Department of Homeland Security and its director should be restored to a cabinet level status. FEMA should be decentralized and decisions made at the supervisor level with full authority for this type disaster. Bureaucracy takes too long when suffering is in the balance. FEMA can't lose 500 employees, many with years of experience and knowledge, have its funds stripped by DHS for other purposes and now be further dismantled and diminished by transferring one of the four integral functions, preparedness, and be expected to respond like it used to. Homeland Security can have a preparedness program. The National Weather Service has one as does the Red Cross. But all hazards preparedness needs to stay with FEMA. We have to stop fixing things that aren't broken.

If we want to fix something that is broken, let's address Emergency Management Performance Grant (EMPG) funding. The Emergency Management Performance Grant is the only source of funding for all hazards that keeps Emergency Management afloat on the state and local levels. Emergency managers create the framework by which local governments respond to disaster situations. All politics is local and all responses are local and our emergency management officers who have the vital role of planning, preparedness, drills, and coordination of services are seriously understaffed. The only means of sustaining our local capability is through EMPG.

Every year the International Association of Emergency Managers and the National Emergency Management Association testify about the EMPG short fall which is now at \$264 million a year. Every year a delegation of emergency managers from Mississippi and many other states make the pilgrimage to Washington to plead for increases for this vital program. It is the very backbone of emergency management in America-- the local people now on the coast working 18 hour days trying to get things back to normal. Other contacts we make are emails, phone calls, and faxes. The stack of them for the last ten years just from Mississippi would be about 6 inches high on this table. And every year it goes to the wire on trying to get the funding increased. You have to build your response capability from the locals up. They are the ones on the scene for hours until state resources can get there. Then it is days before the federal resources can get there.

FEMA's response, in most cases, is only as good as the local emergency management program. The FY 06 appropriation for EMPG in the Department of Homeland Security Budget is \$185 million, a five million dollar increase over last year. This will probably mean about \$100,000 to Mississippi which means about \$1,000 to my county. The shortfall is at \$264 million. We have to do better by the things that work and the things that work best are strong local programs depending on EMPG and a cabinet level FEMA Director with decentralized decision making.

I sincerely thank you for giving me this opportunity to visit our nation's Congress to provide this testimony and will be happy to answer any questions you may have.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Kent W. Buckley
P.O. Box 538
Cleveland, Ms 38732

662-843-2300 office
662-846-2923 fax

kentbuckley@cableone.net

